

Avoiding Oil Spills from Abandoned Heating Oil Fill Pipes

Imagine walking into your home one day and finding it filled with strong petroleum odors. Looking for the cause, you discover that your basement floor is covered with several hundred gallons of heating oil. Shocked and confused, you know you stopped using heating oil last year when you converted the house to natural gas and removed the oil storage tank in the basement ... so what happened?



What is the problem?

Each year heating oil spills occur in homes that no longer heat with oil. The common factors in these spills are that an unused heating oil fill pipe was not properly removed or abandoned and oil was delivered to the wrong place. In these cases, as much as several hundred gallons of oil get pumped into the basement of the home destroying belongings and causing an environmental mess that is difficult to clean. Clean-up costs can run into the tens of thousands of dollars and the family will often need to live elsewhere until the clean-up is complete due to the strong odors and health concerns related to the oil fumes.

What is an abandoned oil fill pipe?

An abandoned fill pipe is the oil fill pipe previously used to connect an indoor heating oil storage tank to the outside of a home. A heating oil truck connects to the fill pipe to fill the oil tank. The fill pipe and associated vent pipe usually penetrate a foundation wall in a location accessible to the street. When the heating fuel source in a home is switched from oil to another fuel such as natural gas, the oil storage tank and delivery piping is no longer used. Sometimes the tank is removed and the oil fill pipe is abandoned or left in place. NYS Law and the Building Code* requires that the oil fill and vent lines be removed or filled with concrete to avoid an unwanted delivery.

A homeowner can be held responsible for the cost of cleaning up a fuel oil spill associated with an abandoned fill pipe on their property.

What should I do if I have an abandoned fill pipe?

If you have an abandoned oil fill pipe, the pipe should be physically removed by cutting and extracting the pieces. The hole in a foundation can be repaired with appropriate materials (cement, wood). The pipe can also be abandoned and made unusable by filling the in-place piping with concrete. Avoid temporary repairs as these can be undone during a well intentioned oil delivery meant to rescue another household that placed a "no heat" call to the oil delivery company during the cold of winter.

What if I am planning to change heating fuels in the future?

If you plan to change from oil to gas heat, you should obtain a building permit from your local permit issuing official. Even if you do the work yourself, you are still required to obtain a building permit. The code enforcement officer will make inspections to ensure that the work is completed appropriately.

* Executive Law, Article 18, section 378.13 requires " if the heating oil storage tank is to be removed, the vent line, oil fill pipe and related piping shall be removed, or the oil fill pipe shall be filled with concrete." These requirements are codified in the New York State Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code, Section F3404.